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Housing

Introduction - Objectives:

Newton's residents are riding a wave of the city's changing ages and housing costs. Newton Centre's location, history and potential make it appropriate for "smart growth" development in the commercial area. This involves making the area more visually attractive and adding multi-family residential buildings, multi-story buildings with residences over retail, and low-rise multi-family housing in ~ transition areas. Creating housing that is more central can fill several demographic, environmental and vitality needs to enhance the whole neighborhood. Other recent Newton reports also speak about increasing diversity, walk ability and cohesiveness.

Mixed Use Development:

Newton has many large, single-family-detached homes, which will continue to set the character of Newton and accommodate people, especially in the child-rearing years. For those seeking different types of residences, developers have been creating (usually very expensive) condominiums and rental apartments on Route 9, Needham Street and elsewhere. However, there is a missing element in what has been developed, namely housing for those who desire to live right in the heart of the community with its conveniences and vitality. When people live in and near buildings housing the various services they want (food, entertainment, banks, clothes, dentists and cleaners for example) they are less dependent on cars, their environmental impact is less, they provide "eyes on" safety to the area and they become less socially isolated as individuals. There are more people on the sidewalks and customers for the businesses.

Newton Centre as a Place to live:

Location, location, location... Newton Centre has it. It is near the heart of Boston, with the convenience of the Green Line, buses and major north-south (Center) and east-west (Beacon) streets. It has a sprinkling of architecturally significant older, taller buildings as well as significant green spaces. The triangle parking lot used to hold a magnificent, four story elementary school and historic pictures show various uses in the area nearby which no longer exists. Today, there are many single stories architecturally undistinguished buildings in the immediate center and apartments have been replaced by commercial users on upper floors of multi-story buildings.

Different kinds of people would find Newton Centre an appealing place to live because of its convenient access to major area employment centers using the T, buses, bikes and walking; its convenient and unique shops and restaurants; its (potentially) lovely strolling environment of interesting storefronts, historic buildings and parks; and its maintenance-free, energy-efficient living in new structures.

Newton Demographics:

The city's stagnant or declining population is getting older and income stratification is occurring as housing prices rise. Statistics indicate that "new" Newton households are substantially wealthier than the people they displace. Housing needs are projected to need to grow between

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2 % and 3% over the next ten years and social and economic diversity needs to be continually addressed. Despite

Its image as a wealthy community, 30% of Newton residents earn less than 80% of the HUD-defined area median income: the income level that establishes the price of "affordable" housing.

It has been suggested that the Newton school system cannot support the creation of additional housing. While the City has never studied the source of increased enrollment, discussions with members of the real estate community in Newton strongly suggest that, while almost all-new housing in Newton has been mufti-family, almost all of the increase in school enrollment is the result of younger families buying existing single-family homes from empty nesters.

Some seniors want to move out of their big homes and downsize to a townhouse, flat or a condominium where someone else would take care of maintenance. Others want or need to move within their community but with more care provided. Civil servants, business support staff, and young professionals who work in Newton's businesses and want a chance to live here affordably; as do the children of Newton residents. By living near the heart of Newton Centre in taller buildings, these and others can remain in the community and enhance the sense of community involvement.

What is Preventing Change?

Newton's city zoning regulations were drafted at the end of World War II and supported what the public wanted at that time. Then, having a modern home with a yard was preferred and old buildings (such as those in Newton Centre) reminded people of the depression and war struggles. Soldiers who had spent the war years living communally wanted to be separated from their neighbors and Federal transportation policy and mortgage subsidies supported the development of single-family subdivisions. Energy was cheap and shopping by car in one-story shopping centers with lots of parking places were the land-use model.

Now, with two-worker households and environmental awareness, we have changed our image of the future. "Smart growth" envisions less urban sprawl and wasteful consumption. Yet in Newton Centre, building heights are still limited to 24 feet without a special permit, and parking is required "on site" even if the building sites are too small to accommodate parking. Between this and the setback and side yard requirements, feasible mufti-family development in Newton Centre not only requires a special permit but often a zoning variance as well.

For future development, owners of small sites would best work collectively to accommodate higher structures, different parking arrangements and compatibility with the best historic features of the Centre. Currently much of Newton Centre is serviceable but undistinguished and some of it has the right (higher) scale and distinguished character of being built for the long term. Ironically, most of the pre-war structures in Newton Centre could not be built there today.

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Some historic buildings are the "right" scale (generally less than 60 feet) with steep roofs compatible with the surrounding Victorian-era homes. Some are joined together to provide continuous rows of storefronts, encouraging patrons to visit more than one place. Their materials tend to be of durable, timeless materials and attractive. The single-story rows of shops belie our prosperity, our self-respect as a society and our care for the environment.

Under current zoning of the Newton Centre business area, housing is allowed but because of the height and parking restrictions, owners have little incentive to upgrade their properties and the strong

Retail market keeps rents high, even in deteriorating buildings. Whether it shows or not, the current buildings generally have old structural, plumbing and heating/air conditioning systems.

What is Proposed:

To renew the business area of Newton Centre we would do well to think about how we can have more residents (customers and contributors) actually living there, close to the many services. This will require the Aldermen to change the current zoning regulations to allow more housing to be built including above retail. Buildings should be comparable in height to the historic buildings in the Centre, scaling back as they near current single-family neighborhoods.

Parking (and the facilitation of the use of alternatives to private cars) would need to be addressed by the Aldermen by revising the on-site parking requirements. Short-term and long-term off -site parking can be facilitated by utilizing DIF and other revenue bond and public grant programs to build parking in advance; and developers (in exchange for the right to build higher) can be required to provide onsite parking or payment to the City's Parking Fund for the building of near-by structures (decked garages).

As has been the City's policy, a portion of these new units should be "affordable." These would be available to 30% of the current residents of Newton. Newton Centre is particularly suitable for this kind of housing as it is one of the few places in the City where one can live without owning a car. In conjunction with this goal, the City should seriously consider establishing Newton Centre as a Smart Growth Zoning District so that the City can receive State incentive payments for mixed income residential development. Over thirty Massachusetts cities and towns as varied as Boston, Plymouth, Reading and Newbury have or are in the process of establishing such districts.

Other sections of the Newton Centre Task Force document speak to improving pedestrian pathways through and between blocks of buildings to improve "connectivity", providing design guidelines on housing quality, and parking and traffic improvements. These are all an integral part of this proposal.

As the Newton Comprehensive Plan (currently under consideration by the Board of Aldermen) states:

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"Residential development that is well located in relationship to transportation, schools, commercial services, large employers and existing patterns of residential type and character benefit the City in multiple ways... Housing retained or developed in or near village centers supports village businesses, and having a broad array of village services within walking distance benefits residents. That linkage strengthens the vitality and quality of life for the (entire) area."